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CENTRAL AMERICA

Straight Talk

Rebels challenge an army

Despite some improvement, the overall performance of El Salvador's army remains "checkered." So testified General Paul Gorman, head of the Panama-based U.S. Southern Command, in an appearance last week before a House subcommittee. Indeed, two days earlier, a dawn guerrilla raid on three villages west of San Salvador left 63 civil-defense guards and three civilians dead. Army reinforcements did not arrive until the afternoon, after the fighting had ended.

Then, on Thursday, four heavily armed men claiming to be members of a leftist guerrilla group attempted to rob a bank in Soyapango, a working-class suburb of San Salvador, killing a security guard and taking 73 hostages. Police surrounded the bank, while Red Cross officials negotiated with the rebels. After nearly 23 tense hours, the guerrillas surrendered. The episode alarmed Salvadoran authorities: until recently, the rebels had rarely launched an attack so close to the capital.

Nonetheless, General Gorman said, he would oppose sending U.S. troops to El Salvador, even if its government was in danger of falling to leftist guerrillas. Yet he did suggest that the number of U.S. military advisers there be increased from 55 to 125. Congress is not likely to view the request favorably. Last week, although the Senate Appropriations Committee approved \$116 million more in military aid to El Salvador, the House refused to include such funds in an emergency spending bill.

The Administration temporarily abandoned its effort to persuade Congress to continue funding for the CIA-backed contras, who are fighting the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. Despite this, Gorman offered new evidence to support the Administration's contention that the Sandinista government is partly to blame for the guerrilla successes in El Salvador. During a closed session, he showed videotapes shot in June of what appeared to be Nicaraguan boats unloading weapons onto Salvadoran beaches.

Meanwhile, a former Nicaraguan diplomat who defected last fall told a Senate subcommittee on drug abuse that several Sandinista leaders were directly involved in smuggling cocaine into the U.S. In Miami, a U.S. Attorney presented a federal court with photographs purporting to show Nicaraguan soldiers and a government aide loading cocaine onto a plane bound for Miami. The Sandinistas have denied the charges, which first surfaced in July.



Gorman